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Study findings leave questions

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Tonawanda News — TOWN OF TONAWANDA – New York State Department of Health official James Bowers detailed the agency's proposal at a presentation Wednesday night to conduct a biomonitoring study that would test 100 residents' urine for benzene and other chemicals.

The recommendation comes after a nearly three year DOH study found elevated rates of cancer and “statistically significant elevations” of lung cancer and bladder cancer in both males and females, esophageal cancer in males and uterine cancer in females, as well as oral-cavity/pharynx cancer in males and leukemia among women.

The DOH also found evidence of elevated preterm births and heart defects in newborns, but evidence of elevated major defects was, fortunately, not discovered.

Last month, the state agency published the study's final report on the area, which covered the town, the City of Tonawanda and Buffalo. The document included resident comments and the recommendation to complete the urine testing.

Bowers acknowledged the many limitations that the study would have.

“We won't know where the benzene came from ... it could be from Tonawanda Coke, it could be from smoking and it could be because you pumped gas this morning,” he said.

Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, the other chemical that would be tested, could come from diet, smoking, auto emissions and wood fires, he said.

Levels of benzene in the air have also been dramatically reduced over the past decade, but the chemical only stays in the body for about 72 hours, making it impossible to assess how much benzene residents had in their systems four or five years ago.

The Clean Air Coalition sent a letter to DOH Commissioner Nirav Shah this week that expressed concern that the study is too narrowly focused on coke oven gas emissions and benzene.

“The community is, however, concerned about the high levels of many different air pollutants from the over 53 industrial plants in the neighborhood,” the letter reads.

The biomonitoring study would involve a group of residents and the DOH creating the parameters of the testing. The study would likely take place in the warmer months, when windows are open and air enters

the home, Bowers said. Any results would be confidential and would only be shared with a doctor at the participant's request.

"It's a very small sample size, and we would not be able to determine any health outcomes from the testing ... it is very specific and very limited," Bowers said.

Bowers is asking for feedback from residents on whether they support the testing. Another meeting is set for 7 p.m. today at the St. Timothy Evangelical Lutheran Church, located at 1453 Staley Road on Grand Island. Further comments can also be sent to Bowers at beoe@health.state.ny.us.

Wednesday, residents expressed concern about the project's limited scope. In its letter to the commissioner, the Clean Air Coalition said that their members have requested research that would lead to legislation, regulatory activity or other improvements.

"The DOH should take an active role to brief policy makers," Rebecca Newberry, of the coalition, wrote. "Some policy and regulator examples mentioned were cumulative impact legislation, more resources allocated for inspections (and) testing for particulates."

But Joyce Hogenkamp, president of Citizens United for Justice, said she supports the project and suggested that it could lead to more in-depth studies.

"This needs to be done, even if it is a small step forward, it is one that the community deserves," she said.

But when City of Tonawanda resident Rick Davis, who was elected mayor Tuesday night, asked about longterm plans to go beyond the finite study, Bowers said there are none due to budget constraints and the constant competition for resources.

The DOH began the health outcomes review in 2010, after a state Department of Environmental Air Quality Study found high concentrations of a known carcinogen, benzene, as well as formaldehyde, in the Tonawanda air.

The study concentrated on reproductive effects and cancer, as both have been associated with exposure to benzene and formaldehyde. The DOH worked with the DEC to identify areas of the town that were more likely to have high or moderate effects from benzene exposure, and examined health outcomes in four different subsections identified as Brookside-Terrace, Sheridan Park, Riverside and Grand Island.

The study examines illness rates between 1990 and 2009, and the rates were then compared to analyses of statewide data and Erie and Niagara county rates.

In one subsection studied, Sheridan Park, the DOH expected to find 268 cases of cancer, but 332 cases were found.

The study found that bladder cancer had statistically significant elevations in the Brookside area for men; total cancers, lung cancer and bladder cancer had statistically significant elevations in Sheridan Park for men and women.

Elevations of uterine cancer in Sheridan Park were also found.

No types of cancer were statistically significantly elevated in Riverside except for lung cancer for women, and in Grand Island, esophageal cancer was statistically significantly elevated among men, and uterine cancer among women.

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